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Peter Heather,
Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 408. Cloth
(ISBN 978-0-19-936274-5) \$29.95.

Peter Heather has distinguished himself as the rare scholar capable of writing works that are both accessible to general audiences and original scholarly contributions. Having previously analyzed the fall of the western Roman empire and the history of Europe in the first millennium in this fashion, Heather's latest dual-audience volume turns to the military history of the reign of the emperor Justinian. Heather's central question is the character of Justinian and his reign, and he aims to place the emperor on a spectrum between "romantic visionary" and disastrous adventurer (7-9). In the process, Heather foregrounds two questions: did Justinian have a master plan for reconquering the west, and were his conquests ultimately worthwhile from an imperial-economic perspective?

The introduction quickly establishes these questions before moving on to assess our principal source for Justinian's reign, Prokopios of Kaisareia. A student of imperial panegyric, Heather is refreshingly dismissive of the supposed problems surrounding the differing tones of Prokopios' three works, especially between the invective of the *Secret History* and the panegyric of the *Buildings*.

The first chapter surveys the ideological background of Roman imperialism in late antiquity. Heather argues that, after Constantine, the Roman state viewed itself as a divinely sanctioned civilizing force, whose mandate to rule was predicated on its religious and cultural superiority to neighboring peoples and states. This self-understanding was closely linked to the divine status of the emperor, whose legitimacy was conceived of in almost entirely religious terms and reified through the fulfillment of his "civilizing mission" (Heather's phrase) by means of military victory.

The second chapter explores the tactical and administrative implications of the late Roman state's rapid and significant militarization beginning in the tetrarchic period. The chapter is broken into two parts: a survey of the evolving structures, equipment, and strategies of the new-model Roman armies of late antiquity, and an assessment of the implications of these changes for the administrative apparatus of the Roman state. In particular, Heather argues that the fiscal and administrative

evolution of the late Roman state reoriented the careers of local elites away from town councils towards the central administration.

Chapter Three turns to the question of imperial politics in New Rome from Zeno to Justinian. Heather here puts elements of the previous two chapters into motion to reconstruct the realities of imperial governance. For Heather, the emperor's position was always precarious and all major decisions, especially decisions related to dynasty and succession, could only be taken at moments when the regime possessed an excess of political capital. Hence the failure of Anastasius to name any of his nephews as his heir was the result of the unpopularity of his religious policies and his weakness in the face of Vitalian's revolt. Heather never develops a systematic model for imperial politics in the capital, though the people and administration are clearly marked as unimportant, while the military and, to a much lesser extent, the Church are given the most prominence. His reconstruction, moreover, fails to bridge the gap between the theory of the divinely sanctioned emperor presented in Chapter One and the political weakness of individual emperors in Chapter Three.

Chapter Four sets the stage for the reconquests of Justinian by discussing the emperor's early attempts to win legitimacy through religious policies, legal reform, and, above all, military victory against Persia. It was the failure of this last that Heather argues was primarily responsible for the Nika Revolt. In many ways, Heather sees the Nika Revolt as the defining moment in Justinian's reign; it was the nadir of his imperial legitimacy and primary motivation for the North African campaign and thus the campaigns that followed.

Chapters Five through Nine are given over to a survey of Justinian's wars and are the strongest chapters in the volume. Heather shines as a military historian, reframing Prokopios' information to clarify the strategic and tactical implications of Belisarios' generalship, while offering compelling analyses of why the Romans were able to win their impressive and improbable victories over the Vandals and Goths, which he convincingly argues were the result of *ad hoc* decision-making rather than a grand strategy.

Even readers intimately familiar with Prokopios' narrative will find much to appreciate here. Heather begins his accounts of the Vandal and Gothic wars with surveys of their fifth-century histories. This background informs the main narrative, explaining phenomena as diverse as the brittleness of the Vandal military and the strategic logic underpinning Belisarios' advance from Rome to Ravenna. In the same vein, Heather demonstrates the critical role that elite field army units played in Justinian's campaigns, keeping a close eye not just on the quantity, but also the quality of soldiers deployed. The result makes clear sense of the sometimes jumbled

picture that emerges from Prokopios' narrative. Finally, Heather rehabilitates Justinian's response to the end of the Eternal Peace in 540, demonstrating the logic behind allowing Khusrow to wear himself out in Mesopotamia and the Caucasus, rather than risking a single climactic battle.

Chapter Ten completes the narrative of Justinian's reign and briefly surveys the subsequent history of the reconquered territories. The final chapter continues the narrative down to the Islamic conquest and assesses the implications of Justinian's reign for the fate of the eastern Roman empire in the seventh century. Heather concludes that the reconquests were a net gain for the eastern empire, persisting long enough to allow Constantinople to recoup its initial investment, and too far separated from the seventh century to be blamed for the loss of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria to the Persians and then the Arabs.

Ultimately, *Rome Resurgent* is a mixed bag. Noticeably shorter than Heather's other works, the volume sits uncomfortably between its intended audiences. Moments of potential insight, such as reading the failure of peace negotiations with Persia in 525 as Justinian's attempt to undermine Anastasius' nephew Hypatios, are left underdeveloped. Meanwhile the notes rely too heavily on the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, which is neither sufficient to satisfy scholars nor accessible to a popular audience. There are also some surprising gaps in the bibliography, ranging from Philip Rance's work on the Battle of Taginae to Peter Bell's monograph on conflict and ideology in the Justinianic empire. Heather moreover fails to advance a coherent interpretation of Prokopios' agenda, and makes no meaningful attempt at source-criticism for authors such as Agathias and Corippus, who come to prominence in the later chapters after the end of Prokopios' narrative. Finally, there is a fundamental disconnect at the heart of Heather's reconstruction of imperial politics; he places tremendous emphasis on a narrowly defined concept of legitimacy resting on the twin pillars of victory and religion, but never makes clear who assessed imperial legitimacy. This reductive view of imperial politics is exacerbated by his depiction of the populace of Constantinople as a chorus-for-hire, existing only to be stage-managed by the chariot factions in return for palace bribes.

These unresolved issues, however, should not obscure the fact that Heather's is now the most coherent and complete overview of Justinian's wars and an essential companion to Prokopios' treatment of the same topic.